

Statement of Chairman Daniel K. Akaka
“Protecting Our Employees: Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and the Federal Workforce”
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District
of Columbia
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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This hearing will come to order. Good morning and welcome to our distinguished panelists and guests. I would like to thank you all for joining us here today for this hearing on Federal agencies’ preparedness in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak.

Pandemic influenza continues to be a grave threat facing the United States and the world. The United Nations’ World Health Organization (WHO), which coordinates global pandemic preparedness and response efforts, has said that infectious diseases are spreading faster than at any time in history.

At the end of April, illnesses due to the novel H1N1 influenza virus spread across North America and, over a short period of time, around the globe. H1N1 has resulted in over 28,000 infections and nearly 150 deaths to date. Last week, the WHO raised the pandemic alert level to phase six, a full-blown global pandemic. Fortunately, so far, the virus has been relatively mild, but influenza viruses mutate rapidly, and H1N1 poses a significant threat.

The WHO has estimated that a serious pandemic influenza outbreak could cause more than seven million deaths worldwide. In the last century, three pandemics killed approximately 43 million people worldwide, including more than 500,000 Americans. Public health officials have said for years that we need to prepare for the inevitable flu pandemic. We must do all we can to protect our communities from this threat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that up to 40 percent of employees may be absent from work during a severe pandemic. In addition to those who are ill, employees may stay home to care for sick family members or due to fear of infection. An influenza pandemic threatens the operation of Federal agencies because essential workers could be absent for weeks, or even months, at a time.

Detailed planning is necessary throughout the Federal government to ensure continuity of operations, while protecting employees. The activities of agencies critical to Americans’ safety, health, and well-being cannot be allowed to stop during a pandemic; neither can we endanger the dedicated men and women who carry out those duties.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued a number of reports addressing pandemic influenza preparedness. After a series of hearings on this topic this Subcommittee held in the fall of 2007, Senator Voinovich and I requested that GAO review pandemic preparedness plans for the federal workforce, focusing on critical staff that require daily onsite activity.

GAO’s report, released today, concludes that while many Federal agencies are making progress to protect their workers and to identify essential functions that can be continued during a pandemic, the progress is uneven. Some agencies are only in the early stages of developing their pandemic plans. GAO also found that there is no real mechanism in place to monitor agencies’ pandemic workforce

plans. We will address GAO's recommendation to improve monitoring and reporting on agencies' progress with their plans at today's hearing.

Strong planning is just the first step. Agencies must ensure that their plans are up to date and operationally sound. Moreover, they must engage employees and communicate those plans clearly.

Senator Voinovich and I have introduced two bills to enhance agencies' ability to translate pandemic planning into smooth operations. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2009 (S. 707) would require agencies to develop robust telework policies and address telework in continuity of operations planning. Strong and tested telework programs will be essential to continuing operations when social distancing is in order and many employees are absent.

Additionally, the Federal Executive Board (FEB) Authorization Act (S. 806) would formalize the role of FEBs in an emergency event and authorize needed funding to support their mission. FEBs will play a critical role in coordinating the activities of lead Federal, State, and local government officials outside the Washington D.C. area during any pandemic flu response.

Additionally, as I stated, agencies must make sure employees have the information they need about pandemic plans. In particular, there must be clear guidance to Federal employees regarding employees' rights to protect themselves at the workplace. Employees must receive this information before a pandemic occurs. It may be too late to be effective if employees are given the information they need after an outbreak occurs.

I am concerned that federal agencies have not done enough to protect the federal workforce from the current outbreak of H1N1. Employees who interact with hundreds or thousands of travelers daily in the Customs and Border Protection and Transportation Security Administration received conflicting guidance. This is unacceptable.

As reports from the field indicate, employees who asked to wear protective masks were told they could not. However, this policy is not part of the official guidance distributed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The men and women on the front lines must be able to trust that their agencies will develop and distribute clear policies in a timely manner during an emergent event. Proper coordination between DHS, OPM, and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is needed to accomplish this.

Public health officials warn that we may see a resurgence of a stronger, more threatening version of the novel H1N1 virus later this fall. Agencies need to make sure now that the workforce is properly informed of policies and guidance so we are ready if that happens.

I know that you all have put a lot of thought and energy into developing plans to protect the workforce from the current pandemic and future threats, while ensuring continuity of government operations. In particular, I know DHS, OPM, and HHS are coordinating to develop clear and consistent workforce guidance. I look forward to hearing about this important work today.